# My Life

*after Henri Michaux*

## *Joe Wenderoth*

**Somehow it got into my room.  
I found it, and it was, naturally, trapped.  
It was nothing more than a frightened animal.  
Since than I raised it up.  
I kept it for myself, kept it in my room,  
kept it for its own good.  
I named the animal, My Life.  
I found food for it and fed it with my bare hands.  
I let it into my bed, let it breathe in my sleep.  
And the animal, in my love, my constant care,  
grew up to be strong, and capable of many clever tricks.  
One day, quite recently,  
I was running my hand over the animal's side  
and I came to understand  
that it could very easily kill me.  
I realized, further, that it would kill me.  
This is why it exists, why I raised it.  
Since then I have not known what to do.  
I stopped feeding it,  
only to find that its growth  
has nothing to do with food.  
I stopped cleaning it  
and found that it cleans itself.  
I stopped singing it to sleep  
and found that it falls asleep faster without my song.  
I don't know what to do.  
I no longer make My Life do tricks.  
I leave the animal alone  
and, for now, it leaves me alone, too.  
I have nothing to say, nothing to do.  
Between My Life and me,  
a silence is coming.  
Together, we will not get through this.**

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Is It Worth It?

Any dream big or small can fill a person with aspiration and motivation. With a specific goal in mind people become inspired to put forth a great deal of effort and energy into their every action. Some may seem too overdue and go above and beyond what is necessary to fulfill whatever fantasy they crave. The overachievers of the world will discover the thrill of tiptoeing closer and closer to what they wish for most of all. Every tedious task and sleepless night can be justified with the knowledge that in the end they will finally reach the top of the mountain and claim victory upon what they once thought was a hopeless vision. Once the finish line is passed and the winners finally have a moment to simply bask in the glory of their triumph, new thoughts can not help but deplete the excitement. What will happen now that tedious hours of work are unnecessary, and is there a possibility that everything may have worked out the same way without trying so hard? The answers may never be known to these questions, but one thing is certain, from the very beginning of one man’s rise to the top, no matter what great accomplishments one does in his or her life, no one can escape death. It may sound dramatic, but once the big obstacle in one’s life has been conquered there is no longer something to keep a person distracted from the fact that one day everything they worked for will be of little meaning. “My Life” by Joe Wenderoth shows how horrid the effect of the realization of one’s own inevitable demise is in the end. “My Life“ uses an extended

metaphor, irony of the situation, and organization to convey that no matter how much effort people put into creating a successful life, mortality will always conquer in the end.

“My Life” grabs the reader’s attention by bringing to life the concept of how painful accepting death can be. The poem does this by relating the growth and maturity of a person’s life to taking care of a house pet. The poem uses an extended metaphor to fully portray this house pet as the idea of life. For the extended metaphor, both the literal and figurative terms are presently named throughout the poem. The literal term in the poem is “animal” while the name of the animal represents the figurative term “My Life.” The “animal” is “raised” and “fed” and kept in “constant care” by the speaker (Wenderoth 3,4,8,10). The speaker finds it is his duty to protect the helpless creature that wanders its way into his room. He takes up the position seriously and does everything he possibly can to ensure that the animal grows up to be healthy and strong. While the poem literally describes a relationship of a nurturer to a helpless creature, the poem’s depiction of the speakers care for the animal figuratively animates the idea of a person growing and maturing. The person at first was “frightened” and “trapped” as all humans are upon first entering the world (Wenderoth 2-3). Babies are dependent on others to watch over them, just as a pet is loyal and hopeful that his master will provide him with his needs. The speaker who was once afraid and insecure, slowly but surely commits him or herself to becoming self-sufficient and hard-working. The person discovers a passion for being independent and reaches a climatic moment of success and competition of the task to self-discovery. The extended metaphor remains constant as the direction of the poem switches.

The expected conclusion of the poem would involve, literally, an unbreakable bond between the animal and his master, and figuratively, complete satisfaction, joy, and a mind free of worrisome thoughts. The speaker does what any kind-hearted individual would do. His actions are praise worthy and should be rewarded; surely some type of good must come to the speaker for working so tediously and full-heartily. This conclusion not only sounds clichéd and unrealistic, but it leaves little room for unearthing a greater meaning behind the scenes of the poem. Instead of this predictable, happy ending, a terrific use of irony of the situation allows the storyline of “My life” to take a completely different turn on line 12.

When the speaker has a chance to reflect upon the situation, he starts to see a completely different perspective. This little innocent pet he has been raising now has the ability to overpower him. He even begins to believe the sole purpose “why [he] raised it” and helped further it’s “[existence]” is so that it could have the ability to destroy his life (Wenderoth 17). Figuratively, the speaker has dedicated himself to building up and improving his life. He finally is happy with where he is at the present time, but what about the future? What will happen next for this determined pupil? He no longer has an immediate goal to focus on accomplishing and thus finds himself facing the reality that in the long run we all do not live forever. Everyone eventually has to come to terms with the loss of friends, family, and ultimately his or her own life. This thought releases horror and panic in the speaker. He is confused that all his hard work has only further provoked this final bow. By completely halting any more labor, he tries to take back all his overzealous efforts. He simply hopes that by not trying anymore he may have a chance of

survival. His wish is rejected as his life continues the same as before, only this time he no longer sees a purpose in trying if in the end his death is certain.

The utter despair this man feels completely contrasts his determined attitude at the beginning of the poem. The speaker’s feelings develop gradually as he comes to realize no matter how much effort he has done in comparison to another, all his work and fussing has only distracted him from the fact that he, like all others, will not live forever. The transitions in the mindset of the speaker start with fortitude, which leads to a moment of reflection once success is accomplished, then develops into fear and desperation, and finally a dark and hopeless acceptance. The organization of the poem is vital to accurately depict these different displays of emotion. Most of the sentences in the poem begin with “I.” Each sentence that does not begin with “I” highlights a change in the speaker’s attitude. Line 4 begins with “since,” which first represents the speaker’s decision to take care of the animal. Here the speaker is driven and persistent in his protective watch of aiding in the maturity of his new pet. He connects with it on an intimate level by allowing it to rest in his sleeping quarters and by nurturing it with his own hands.

Once the speaker is fully satisfied with how well grown the animal has become, he allows himself a moment or relaxation. “One” fateful “day” marks when the speaker’s opinion of the animal will change. He looks upon the animal to see its fierce power. Figuratively, the speaker realizes everything he has focused on so obsessively has only blinded him from the imminent truth that death will eventually destroy all he has completed. This unsettling realization then causes the speaker to take action. The previously used word “since” now stands to signify the beginning of the speaker’s desperate plea for help. He tries to deny this menacing death by ceasing to further try or do as he was before. He “[stops]” giving any attention to the animal, or his life. Despite his various attempts at halting it’s growth, he soon understands there is nothing he can do. He has already put too much into his life and the path for him has already been paved. He finally admits he simply does not “know what to do” (Wenderoth 18). Now the speaker has entered his final passive accepting stage. Here the word “between” brings together the animal and the speaker as it seems as though the two will meet there undeniable fate hand in hand. This sense of unity brings the character to a submissive state of mind. His end is nearing and he no longer cares to do anything but sit back and watch.

It is amazing how quickly celebration can turn to tragedy when simply looking at something in a different perspective. What once seemed like a great triumph soon becomes a hopeless moment. People have the choice to live their lives in any way they want, whether it be timidly and nervously, or risky and reckless. Regardless of the type of actions people make, the attitude they have after making their decisions is what will determine the life they lead. The speaker in the poem chose to deny all the good fortune he had created for himself and simply focus on a potentially far off fear. This obsession of something that had not even happened actually caused it to happen. He stopped trying and caring once he realized that one day he will die. He lacked the ability to see any point in living and thus caused an earlier death. Once he decided not to care, he forfeited all the years he still had ahead of him. It is a personal opinion whether this decision was pathetic or understandable, but regardless, what the speaker coped with is something everyone will eventually. The choice of how to accept the idea of death is an individual decision, but whatever that decision may be, it’s certain that it will go hand in hand with how happy that person is the next time they accomplish something.

Work Cited

Wenderoth, Joe. "My Life." *Poetry 180* Ed. Billy Collins. The Library of Congress, 2000. Web. 9 Dec. 2009. <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/079.html>.

